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ABSTRACT

Because community college administrators are under increasing pressure to curtail or eliminate programs due to reduced resources, the need for institutional research in the area of evaluation of educational and support programs arises. There are three basic approaches to program evaluation which are used in most public educational institutions: (1) the market evaluation model which operates through student decisions as reflected in enrollment trends; (2) the instructor/administrator model which relies on expert advice and planning to predict, stabilize, and adjust the institution's response to changing student needs; and (3) the state coordination evaluation model which aims to meet the political need of synchronizing program development and preventing unnecessary program duplication. It is suggested that the key variable in determining the effectiveness of these approaches is a particular college's size. Mount Hood Community College supplements these approaches with a database system whose objectives are to create and maintain a process which identifies the most appropriate "data-based" criteria for program evaluation decisions, and to gather and communicate the decision-relevant data. Outlines and flowcharts illustrate the process and the role of the Office of Research in it. (MB)

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PROGRAM EVALUATION IN THE ERA OF RETRENCHMENT:

THE ROLE OF INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH IN A COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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PROGRAM EVALUATION IN THE ERA OF RETRENCHMENT:
THE ROLE OF INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH IN A COMMUNITY COLLEGE

The nationwide tax revolt is currently escalating the process of retrenchment in American community colleges; a process already initiated by static or even declining enrollment. As a result, college administrators are under increasing pressure to curtail or eliminate marginal programs. In perhaps most cases, however, the evaluation process that precedes determination of a particular program's fate lacks an articulated, well thought-out decision criteria as well as a systematic procedure for gathering and communicating relevant data. Although such limitations do not necessarily lead to incorrect decisions, it is our contention that an alternative, data-based approach to program evaluation can and should be followed whenever possible. By relating the experience with program evaluation at Mt. Hood Community College, we hope to suggest both the virtue and feasibility of a data-based approach.

Before proceeding directly to Mt. Hood's experience or experiment, there are several preliminary questions which need to be addressed. First, why the necessity for the evaluation of educational programs (e.g., Machine Shop Technology, Television Production Technology, etc.) as well as their support programs (e.g., Counseling, Financial Aid, etc.)? The exigencies due to retrenchment have already been mentioned. Even under conditions of prosperity, however, a periodic review of programs, to determine if the program should be continued, modified or terminated, is necessary if a community college is to keep pace with the changing needs of the community which it serves. Although responsiveness to community needs may not save a college's budget from the tax cutting axe, it is one of the few options in the area of preventive medicine open to a public institution.

Given the desirability as well as necessity for program evaluation, how is program evaluation currently conducted at community colleges? Of the various efforts taken in this area, there are at least three basic approaches to program evaluation which are all used in most public, educational institutions. The first, which we refer to as the market evaluation model, operates through student decisions as reflected in enrollment trends. The chief advantages of the market model are that it minimizes decision-making resources that might otherwise have to be devoted to the evaluation process, while at the same time, identifies those programs least effective to students. On the other hand, the market model has two serious disadvantages. First, it does not address the problem of retrenchment in that even popular programs may have to be cut back or terminated. Second, the market model provides only limited responsiveness to community vocational needs as represented by business employment needs, among others.

The second program evaluation model, which we refer to as the instructor/administrator evaluation model, relies on expert advice and planning to predict, stabalize and adjust the institution's response to changing student needs. This model is especially useful during an institution's or program's formative years. Once a large number of programs are established, however, monitoring and review of program performance often becomes haphazard and inconsistently applied. As a result, the limitations of this approach to program evaluation become all too apparent. Soon, parochial, idiosyncratic and political factors become intertwined with formal review processes or become the review process itself.

Our third program evaluation model identified is that of the state coordination evaluation model. In Oregon as well as most other states, a coordinating agency exists at the state level to reduce the deficiencies of the two models discussed above. However, state coordination usually entails conservative evaluation in that it is designed to meet the political need of

synchronizing program development and preventing unnecessary program duplication. State coordination cannot substitute for local responsiveness nor remove the decision-making burden for colleges faced with dwindling resources.

Even with the limitations of each approach to program evaluation noted, we would still suggest that for many colleges some combination of the above models would prove satisfactory. We would further suggest that the key variable in determining the effectiveness of the three approaches is a particular college's size. Relatively large and complex institutions would find it increasingly difficult to live within the combined limitations of the described models. That is, these models of program evaluation assume that poor performance in a particular program will become automatically known to administrators. In large institutions, however, where bureaucracy often weakens communication, the validity of such an assumption becomes questionable. This situation is made even more problematic by the fact that in perhaps most cases, there is no explicitly stated criteria for the comparative evaluation of programs. Thus, under conditions of organizational complexity, program evaluation often exhibits a "seat-of-the-pants" approach to decision-making.

In an effort to overcome the limitations of program evaluation techniques currently employed, Mt. Hood Community College(MHCC) has instituted a data-based approach through its Office of Research. The following outline describes the procedures subsequently developed to aid college administrators in their program evaluation responsibilities. These procedures were designed to make explicit the criteria used by administrators as well as to provide them with reliable, comparable and systematic data so that program evaluation might be conducted on a consistent basis.

At MHCC, the role of institutional research in program evaluation is to supplement the market, instructor/administrator, and state coordination approaches with activities designed around the following three objectives:

(1) to create and maintain a process which identifies the most appropriate "data-based" criteria for program evaluation decisions

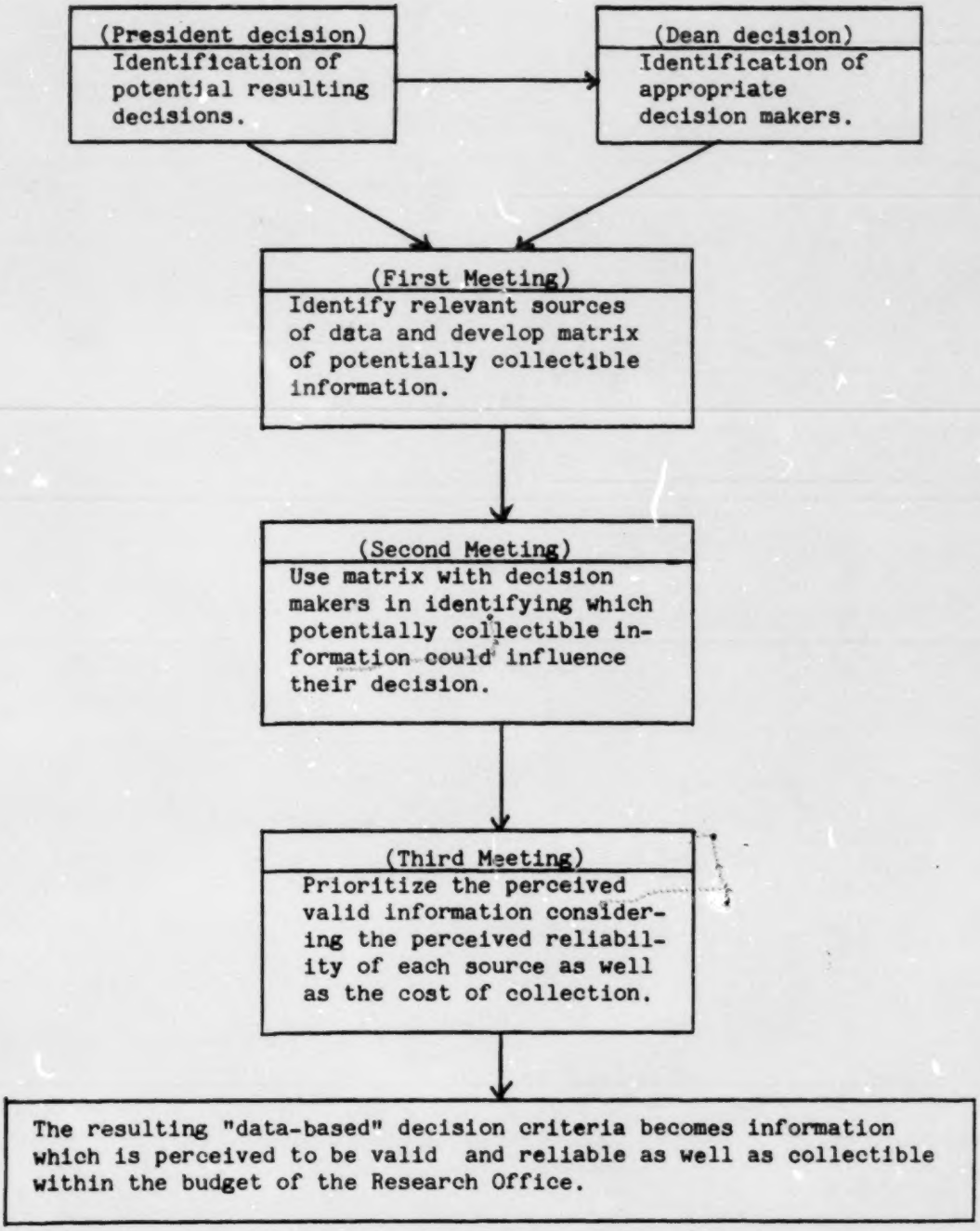
(2) to gather and communicate systematically the decision relevant data

and (3) to consult concerning the uses of reported program evaluation data.

This approach recognizes the validity and vitality of the other approaches to program evaluation. However, this approach adds a well-thought out and articulated procedure designed to gather data directly related to the program evaluation decisions that must be made.

PROCESS TO IDENTIFY DECISION CRITERIA

Our approach postulates that the potential decisions resulting from the process, the identity of the people who should be involved in making these decisions, as well as the sources of relevant data must be clearly articulated in order to identify the most appropriate decision criteria. The process to identify decision criteria is described in the following flow diagram.


(President decision)
Identification of potential resulting decisions.
(Dean decision)
Identification of appropriate decision makers.
(First Meeting)
Identify relevant sources of data and develop matrix of potentially collectible information.
(Second Meeting)
Use matrix with decision makers in identifying which potentially collectible information could influence their decision.
(Third Meeting)
Prioritize the perceived valid information considering the perceived reliability of each source as well as the cost of collection.
The resulting "data-based" decision criteria becomes information which is perceived to be valid and reliable as well as collectible within the budget of the Research Office.

The potential decisions identified for the first year of MHCC's evaluation of the seven instructional programs* were identified as:

(1) program continuation as is;

(2) program modification in:

(a) curriculum objectives,
(b) core course objectives,
(c) faculty in-service,
(d) faculty hiring,
(e) equipment,
(f) facilities,
(g) marketing activities, and/or
(h) student support services; or

(3) program elimination.

Thus, with these potential decisions identified, the appropriate decision makers can be challenged to identify collectible data that could influence their decisions.

While the legally specified decision makers at MHCC are its Board of Education and President, the decisions derived from this evaluation process were assumed to be made in an advise and consent mode by others with a vested interest in the specific program. This assumption is derived from the observation that program improvement suggestions are usually approved up or down the line unless something like cost or feasibility gets in the way. Thus, for the first year of this experimental process a small group of MHCC Deans were involved in identifying decision criteria.**

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*The seven MHCC programs were electronic servicing, electronic engineering, civil engineering, TV production, operating room technology, medical secretary and machine shop. Further, as a side benefit, student support services were evaluated in connection with this sampling of MHCC instructional programs.

**Decision criteria is defined in this report as the decision makers specified conceptual factors which have the ability to be able to influence the identified potential decisions. Collectible information, as distinct from decision criteria, is the data which attempts to describe the identified decision criteria.

The three meetings of this program evaluation working committee were designed for late Fall, with Winter and Spring for data collection, Summer for report writing, and early Fall for the use of collected data in time for annual budget process. These meetings specify the research department's activities within program evaluation for the following year. The agenda for each of the meetings follow the guidelines given in the diagram and are intended to introduce and/or reflect on the program (first meeting), to discuss the validity of the collectible information (second meeting) and to limit the process to what is possible for this year (third meeting). By the end of the third meeting a matrix of data to be collected from specific sources for specific decisions were identified.

PROCESS TO GATHER AND COMMUNICATE DECISION RELEVANT DATA

This matrix identified by program evaluation working committee is used by the Research Department to design data gathering activities by sources and then to create program evaluation reports sorted by decisions which could be influenced by the reported data.

The sources for which data gathering activities were designed were:

(1) students who:

(a) are presently enrolled,
(b) withdrew during term this year,
(c) were full-time during the previous year and didn't return
(d) graduated

(2) instructors;

(3) division chairmen;

(4) employers of graduates;

(5) employers serving on MHCC's program advisory committees;

(6) manpower data from state vocational education department; and

(7) institutional data such as enrollments, expenditures and revenues.

A combination of mailed surveys, telephone surveys, and structured interviews were employed to gather the data items which were identified as having potential to influence decisions.

Table 1 describes this process which lead to seven instructional Program Assessment Documents (PADs) and one student services PAD with sections on admissions and registration, advising and counseling, financial aids, placement, and activities and athletics. Further, Table 1 shows this data being used for local and state reports as well as vocational education funding compliance and veterans administration certification.

The resulting PAD reports were delivered to the instructional and student services offices for use in the identified recommendation cycle.

PROCESS TO MAXIMIZE APPROPRIATE USES OF PADs

The role of the Research Office is to consult regarding PAD process understanding and data interpretations. Further, since the process is intended to be cyclical, the Research Office must try to improve the next version. Along this line, all readers of the PADs are asked for suggestions. Further, readers are asked to attach a description of any non-reported program assessment information which had influenced a recommendation.

After the PADs have been through the review cycle, the research office files these reports for use as base-line data for future comparisons and evaluations. MHCC instructional programs are planned to be reviewed using this PAD process every five years while student services will be reviewed each year. For details regarding PAD results contact MHCC's research department.

TABLE I

DATA COLLECTION AND PROCESSING